NHL / Hockey

Manitoban Leah Hextall proud to become first female play-by-play announcer in NHL history with ESPN

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Leah Hextall.

In a way, it was getting let go from a dream job that allowed Leah Hextall to pursue the greatest opportunity of her sports broadcasting career.

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Back in 2016, the 42-year-old Winnipeg resident and Brandon product was part of a round of cuts at Sportsnet, where she had been working as a host on Hockey Night in Canada.

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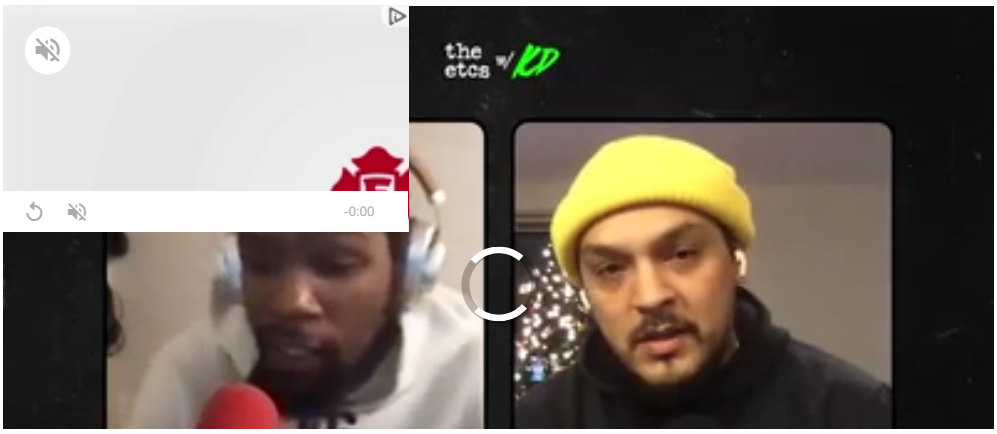

The layoff hit hard, as Hextall was unable to land another gig in broadcasting and wound up taking a job with the office of Manitoba premier Brian Pallister.

But she was not done with the profession she had been learning for 20 years and decided to turn her focus to the craft of hockey play-by-play.

She started by calling Manitoba Moose AHL games for no one but herself and later made professional recordings of herself doing Winnipeg Jets playoff games in 2018.

“I jumped into a booth and I just recorded myself, calling a game out loud,” Hextall recalled. “I was horrible, but I thought, ‘You know what, this is fun.’ I loved doing it so much because it was difficult and you are so involved with every step of the game and you’re telling the story and you’re narrating it.”

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From those humble beginnings, things began to slowly come together and this week her hard work paid off when she was named to ESPN's play-by-play team for the 2021-22 NHL season and beyond.

She is the first woman to ever be hired full-time as a play-by-play announcer in NHL history and it's with a national American network.

"It's in my nature to shy away from the historic nature of it because in the generation of female sports broadcasters that I grew up in, there were so few of us when I first started, that the main goal was to always not feel like you were the woman in the room," Hextall said.

"But what I've learned about this, what I've heard from the general public, is that this is important. This isn't just important to hockey fans. All the feedback I've received is that it's important that we continue to take steps, not just in sports broadcasting, but just in life, to continue to have women in that forward motion. I'm going to take that responsibility and I'm going to continue to put in the work. There has been a lot of work that's gone into it, to get to this point, to be the first woman in this role, on a network like ESPN. But I'm very aware that the work is just starting. I'm going to have to prove myself every single game and that's OK. I actually take pride in that challenge."

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Born in Flin Flon, Man., Hextall grew up in Brandon, where she got her start in broadcasting at CKX television.

The granddaughter of NHL Hall of Famer Bryan Hextall and cousin to famed NHL goalie and current Pittsburgh Penguins general manager Ron Hextall, Leah later worked at CTV Winnipeg, the New England Sports Network in Boston and Sportsnet before making ends meet with a couple of different jobs outside the industry in Winnipeg.

A call she placed to long-time NHL broadcaster Mike "Doc" Emrick started things in motion for her new career in play-by-play.

"He was the first person I spoke to about play-by-play in the industry," she said. "I love the way he called the game. He really allowed the game to be the star and was just narrating the action and being there in the moments that he needed to be.

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"I connected with him and he was the one who told me just to go to a booth at a junior game or any game I could get into and just record myself, calling the game out loud, just like he did when he first started. That's what really started the progression."

Her first gig was calling four games in the Canadian Women's Hockey League in the 2018 season, alongside colour commentator Cassie Campbell-Pascall, a legendary member of the Canadian women's national team.

A year later she became the first woman to call games at the men's NCAA Hockey Championship and in March of 2020, she and Campbell-Pascall made up the first all-female broadcast team for a nationally televised NHL game on Sportsnet.

"It really, truly, comes back to Cassie for me," Hextall said. "That is the first woman that I remember seeing in a booth, who was part of the game call. She was the first woman on Hockey Night in Canada. If she hadn't stepped into that booth, in that role, I don't believe this opportunity would be opening up for me.

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"She really is the standard and that opened a lot of doors."

Hextall is sure to open doors herself now and Campbell-Pascall, who is currently an analyst on Hockey Night and Canada and will be part of the ESPN team next year, said she has earned everything that has come her way.

"For Leah, it's about time," Campbell-Pascall said. "Honestly, I think it couldn't have happened to someone more deserving. She just works so hard and she's been through so many ups and downs in this business. To see her finally get her due and be rewarded, as a friend, it's pretty special to get that opportunity to see it."

While there are female play-by-play announcers in other pro sports — Beth Mowins called a Monday Night Football game on ESPN and Doris Burke calls NBA games — hockey has been a little more "old school" in its ways, Campbell-Pascall said.

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Hextall didn't grow up playi[illegible]mits she had to ask her father some of the rules afte[illegible]t Kings game two decades ago.

Now, here she is, ready to join ESPN's broadcast A-team, working alongside analysts like Mark Messier, Chris Chelios and Ray Ferraro.

She's ready to embrace her role, understanding that it could pave the way for many other women to get into the industry down the road.

"No one has been guarding a door to the play-by-play booth, saying 'No women allowed,'" Hextall said. "You need to make it a choice to do it. I made it a choice and I was greeted with nothing but support from the industry. That opened the door and then it was up to me to work my ass off to improve my skill set to continue to climb up the ladder. The reason I think we've seen limited women in the play-by-play role is that women haven't seen themselves represented in the position. It's not a position that women hold. That is changing."

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Hextall said many young women have reached out to her already, some who are doing play-by-play at the college level.

"I believe it's going to be a generation of women that comes along that will want to be doing play-by-play as broadcasters," she said. "I don't believe anybody is holding us out. It's just that we grew up not seeing women doing that, not seeing ourselves doing that. I didn't know it was a possibility.

"Now women know it's a possibility and there's a whole generation of kids that are gonna turn on the TV and hear my voice calling NHL games and they're just gonna grow up saying 'That's normal.'"

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